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KENNETH ANGER'S QUEST FOR THE DIVINE FLAME

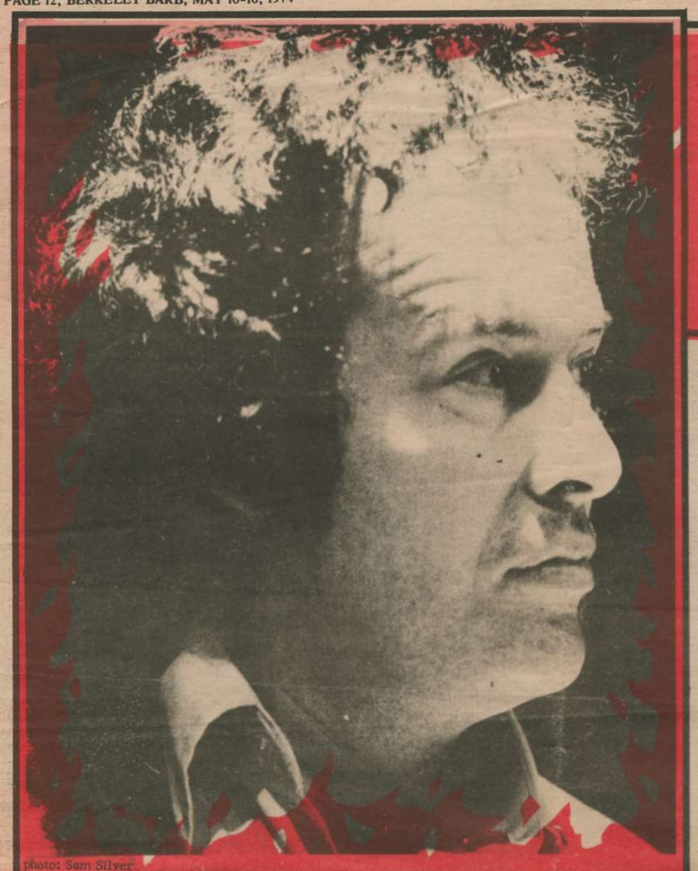

photo: Sam Silver

by Michael Reynolds

(Kenneth Anger is one of the foremost film artists of our time: **Scorpio Rising, Fireworks, Inauguration Of The Pleasure Dome, Invocation Of My Demon Brother, Eaux d'Artifice** and his most recent work, the first part of his epic, **Lucifer Rising.** The following is an excerpt from an interview held at KPFA studios during Anger's Berkeley visit and presentation of his Magick Lantern Cycle last April, 1974.)

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MR: Do you think magick, as reintroduced by Crowley into contemporary times. . .

ANGER: No he didn't do it. Magick has always been around. Crowley merely brought certain things into focus. Which were lying around in sort of a scattered way. He made a coherent picture out of them, the things were always there if someone wanted to search for them. Because Crowley, rather than being an innovator, was a traditionalist. He didn't invent new gods like H.P. Lovecraft. Because Lovecraft was quite serious. He had a vision and he called it Thulu and all this. And it may even be genuine and may even represent something in the Id, the collective unconscious. Crowley was very traditional. It was Venus, Pan Osiris, Isis, Kali, Shiva, whatever. These traditional god forms that have been around for a millienia. He is in a very long tradition.

MR: Do you think you're carrying that on in some of your films?

ANGER: Well, I'm an artist who's merely using a frame of reference the way Botticelli might use first a pagan, then, later, a Christian frame of reference. In his paintings. Because he used a pagan frame of reference until Savonarola freaked him out and brainwashed him into burning his most beautiful canvases.

They were burned in the public square in Florence, the pagan allegories like 'The Birth Of Venus', not the one that survived but there were others that were burned that went a bit farther. Things like 'The Love Of Venus and Mars', when they're both in bed together, the armor put beside the bed. These things have been described, but they're gone. They're burnt. But he did just as beautiful work in the Christian mythology. In other words, he didn't give up being a painter.

And I use Crowley no more in my thinking than older systems like Hindu mythology, American Indian mythology. As I said, my frame of reference comes out of Fraser's **The Golden Bough.** I mean that book covers everything. It's an excellent book.

VF: Do you feel your new film breaks new ground for you?

ANGER: I hope so, I'm always trying to. I feel the assurance as an artist that I can come out with, be out front about certain things. Either the time has come or something. My time has come.

VF: What are you thinking of particularly, I hate to pin you down but. . .

ANGER: Well..Depicting what the Christians call the Devil in art. There's a whole tradition of taboo against doing so. And the first way around this taboo was to turn Lucifer, the Fallen Angel who was called God's most beautiful creation, His favorite son like in the parable of the Prodigal Son or Joseph and His Coat of Many Colors. These are all Luciferian parables.

But his favorite son was kicked out of heaven for giving too many parties and playing the stereo too loud. And we've paid for the consequences ever since. And I want to portray Lucifer, who is my own personal god as I see him. And this film may or may not be sufficient for shat I...because it's a big scale. After all...others have done this like Milton in **Paradise Lost.** I mean Satan is generally considered by Milton scholars to be the hero of **Paradise Lost.**

But Milton has this...after all he is the most interesting person in the book and he's given the best lines. But obviously, Milton had ambivalence about it, 'cause he had all that Puritanical guilt thrust upon him the same way Botticelli did, by Cromwell's crowd. And he considered his blindness the result of sexual indulgence and things like that of his youth. Being a bad boy. I don't know if there was any physical reason for that, it might even had been.

MR: Your film is a pole apart from the Christian American vision that has been manifested in such pictures as **Rosemary's Baby** and **The Exorcist,** which are enormously almost fanatically popular.

ANGER: Yes. Well, these are mere horror films. And it's just using another figure at this particular time that, in the past was Dracula or the Frankenstein monster. I mean it's a figure that involves an unknown dimension. Like something you can't kill or the Undead or the man with horns and the forked tail or whatever who is assuming the very needed role of the Scapegoat. In society.

Whether he be the Jew in the Third Reich or whether he be like the Chinese in the early history of San Francisco, where again they were the scapegoats. Or whether he be the Black in the South up until recent times. Where the need to have someone to lynch every spring, summer and fall, I mean this bloodletting was considered part of the collective neccessities.

MR: There always has to be this figure of Evil. It has to be manifested. But your films really deal with Evil in a healthy fashion.

ANGER: Well in the first place, Evil is trivialized by Hollywood. They have a very trite concept of good and evil. The truth is much more interesting, much more complex. But just to say, like these examples of **Rosemary's Baby,** which at its time made a certain little splash. But both of them are based on pop novels which are badly written. And it's part of the appeal to the middle-class...Mr. & Mrs. Middle Class America, as Walter Winchell said something like that "and all the ships at sea" is if you want to touch the mass mind: write crap.

Both of them are written in a real schlocky way. And schlock is the sort of thing you can read like some people eat marshmallows or roasted peanuts or fritos. You buy a bag and crunch away and you've got through the book and you've added one more digit to the author's royalty and so forth.

VF: What do you think of the Catholic Church in some ways supporting **The Exorcist?**

ANGER: I think they're out of their minds...which they clearly are. They've been out of their minds for some time. And ever since they relinquished the use of Latin, which gave their ceremony an awe and mystery. And their so-called reforms and all that.

You simply cannot reform something like that without, you sort of open up the doors and windows and the light comes in and there is no mystery. There's nothing there, there is no mystery. You stop using incense, you stop doing this whole theatre for the poor, which it used to be. And still is in countries like Mexico and other very heavily Catholic countries."

It isn't the first time the Catholics have been in shaky hands. It's possible some future Pope will pull the thing together, but as time passes it becomes more and more difficult. In other words, if another Pious XII, which was the last really Catholic Pope, came along. Of course, people think he's a monster but I'm not. I'm saying he was a traditionalist.

MR: Is your background Roman Catholic?

ANGER: My grandmother was Cuban and from that side it was. But my father was Scottish-Presbyterian, which is a very strange kind of marriage. And my mother accepted the Presbyterian. They tried to raise me as a Presbyterian, but they didn't get very far.

MR: Now you've become a magickian.

ANGER: A dropout from Sunday school from way back.

MR: You've influenced so many film-makers.

ANGER: They've never sent me one dollar as acknowledgement, I'll tell you that.

MR: You've influenced these film-makers, besides independent film-makers in this country and Europe, and Hollywood films themselves. Things like the **Wild One.** . .the motorcycle image...I think you infused that into the culture once and for all. . .

ANGER: Well, in particular, Roger Corman's motorcycle films with Nancy Sinatra. . .

MR: **Wild Angels.** That's what I meant, not. . .

ANGER: **Wild Angels** was a rip off of two or three of my ideas.

MR: Specific shots!

ANGER: Yeah. Well, you know, all artists are magpies. And steal from each other, but somebody like Roger Corman is just a commercial...what I call a pickpocket. And what can I say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It hasn't made me any richer. It hasn't made me love Hollywood any more. I'm not, "Gee whiz, they pay attention to what I do." That's not my attitude. My attitude is: I knew all along that's what they were like. Because the people who have really stolen things from me are: Roger Corman, Dennis Hopper, Donald Cammell, Lucas, and I could go on with about three or four other names.

MR: I was thinking. .

ANGER: **American Graffiti. Scorsese's Mean Streets.** Even Puline Kael in the 'New Yorker' pointed that out. Several of the set-ups and situations were taken from me.

MR: Lighting, even.

ANGER: Yeah. And of course, **Electra Guild In Blue.** But I never go to see these films. Other people give me detailed reports. I refuse to shell out 3 bucks to see these films.

MR: I think a quality influence was in **Performance,** which I remember reading your saying that it was "a poisonous, negative film" The picture by Cammell & Nicholas Roeg.

ANGER: Well, it wasn't designed to be **The Sound Of Music.** It was definitely a. . .I mean the gimmick of the picture was poisonous mushrooms, the whole thing was taking place in a household full of 'Les fleurs des mals', the flowers of evil. But he never articulately. . .even though, he's an intelligent guy.

I'm talking about Don Cammell, who wrote the script. . .he never added it up into such simplified, stark terms in his own mind before. But it was a reflection of a certain sub-culture which is still around and which at that time was going bad. The way a cheese or a yoghurt can go bad at a certain point. Or a wine can go off. Flower-power gone rank and turning into weeds and we all saw it. The thing was made in '68, while I was in India, and it was not released until '70?

MR: Mm-hnh.

ANGER: And during that time, it sort of fermented in its own juices.

MR: If it had come out in '68, it would have been amazing to presage. . .

ANGER: Well, that shows you what idiots Warner Bros. are. But I know all the people involved in it, including Jimmy Fox who has now become a Billy Graham-evengelist. That was his pay-off for doing the film. Sort of like the allergic reaction that he had dates from working on **Performance** and seeing everybody, the cameraman ...I'm not sending anybody to the pen on purpose, but the cameraman, the director, all the other actors proceeding around with their heads in clouds of very thick, acrid smoke and with mysterious white powders being snorted right and left. And he was a serious stage actor, Jimmy Fox and a very serious person. But it is the dramatic muse's loss and the evangelistic muse's gain, I suppose.

I haven't heard that he's had very many converts, but I suppose he's doing his own thing. He was a very good actor.

MR: Do you think your films, some of them, are dangerous?

ANGER: They can be dangerous for me. Sometimes. Mostly because of my obsession with typecasting. They involve me with fringe elements, which if it wasn't for the film, I would never in a million years have anything to do with this sort of person. I'm talking about casting, using 'real life' actors portraying people in the film.

If it wasn't that I desired to make a film portraying criminals or demons or outsiders or whatever, I probably wouldn't meet too many of those people. It's expanded my consciousness to do so, but I've had a couple of rather hairy experiences where I got more than I bargained for. In other words, sometimes you don't just say "Thanks very much and get lost." That's what I'd like to, frankly. But, you know, they sort of hang around and become a nuisance sometimes. That's the kind of risk.

But some people accuse me of like, exploiting the motorcycle kids in **Scorpio Rising.** But I didn't exploit them. They were perfectly agreeable doing what they did and sort of portraying themselves. And as far as they were concerned. . .after all they lived in Brooklyn and paid for their bikes working in the Fulton Fish Market. And this was about the most colorful thing that had ever happened to them up till then.

Someone paid attention to them, pointed lights at them. They were sort of 100% naive exhibitionists and they loved it, you know. And they were very co-operative, they didn't give me a bad time.

MR: That film, your films using "types" pre-dated Andy Warhol's entrance into that in the mid to late '60s with his attracting "types" and this scene, then pointing his camera at it. You had already stepped out there.

ANGER: Well, I pre-date Andy in lots of ways. The technique of type-casting was invented by Pudovkin and Eisenstein. And under the Bolshevik system, at that time, they had the power as artists of the State, approved artists of the

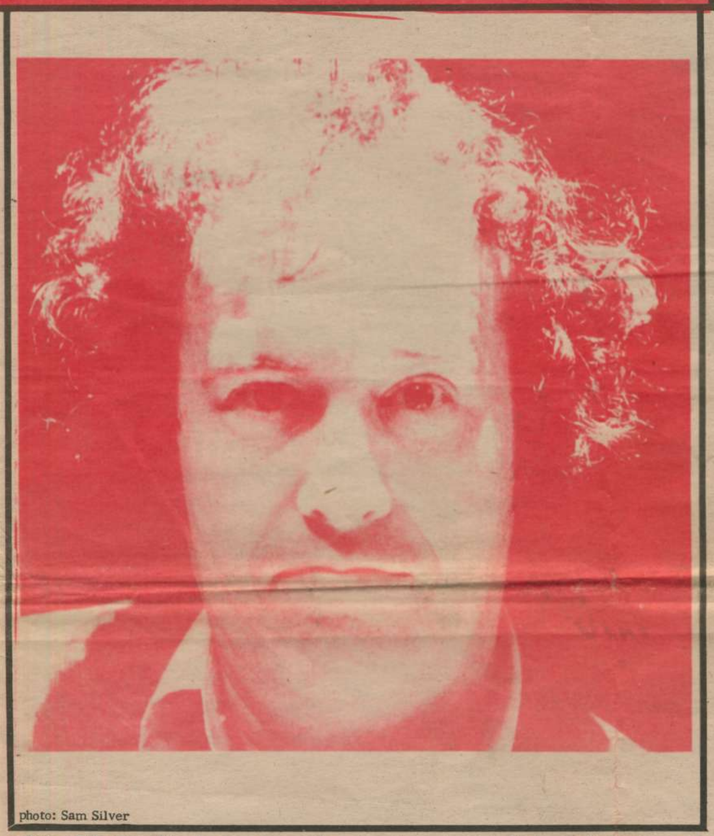

photo: Sam Silver

State, of the divine thing for any film director of walking down the street, pointing at someone or patting them on the back and saying "I want you in my next movie." And they were obliged to say, "Yessir, yessir. When?"

It didn't matter who they were or whether they dug the idea. Maybe they were street cleaners or who knows what. Some of them, I'm sure the idea of doing a film say in Moscow in 1923 or something was just as alien as the way some primitive tribe would react to a helicopter. I mean they didn't like it. Afraid of it, and so forth. These people were able to cajole or seduce them into giving marvelous vignettes of performances in the silent Russian film. As far as Andy Warhol is concerned, he has a genius for attracting negative entities, like a negative magnet. As has been pointed out recently, in Esquire magazine...

MR: Dotson Rader's piece.

ANGER: In Dotson Rader's piece, his casualty rate is rather high, and is even higher now that Candy Darling has died of cancer. A totally unnecessary cancer because it was a cancer from injecting hormones to give the creature breasts. Which is a very dangerous thing to do. So she died of cancer of the breast, which is something women die of too, but I mean if she hadn't have fooled around in that sticky way, being encouraged by people like Andy, she might still be around. A drag queen can always put a couple of grapefruit in and it's just as convincing.

MR: There comes a time when someone must take responsibility.

ANGER: Well, I never met Andy Warhol. And he certainly is not responsible, or doesn't care about the people who die around him. He didn't go to Candy Darling's funeral in New Jersey. In fact, he's never been to any funeral of the people who have died around him. And the list is long. Several dozen. Going back to the early '60s, since there's been a Factory, an Andy Warhol scene. But I call him Mr. Negative.

And the amazing thing is, is that something that is basically a pehnomenon of the '60s is still around in the '70s. And he has the vampire's power of survival. Bill Burrougs has said there's no person there, it's an empty room. But that empty room's still there. Like there's that song from that terrific musical, it got the critics award but is very underrated; **Follies.** Alexis Smith sings "I'm Still Here" Even tho in the old days she didn't sing, and she still can't sing, but she's still here.

But it's very spooky and very interesting work of art about the destruction of the old Roxy theatre in NY and the old showgirls that come back to visit the ruins.

But Andy, just to simplify my life, I call him an enemy, because he stands for everything I hate. And the way he uses people, is also something I hate. Because I think people are potentially, gods and goddesses. That we all have it somewhere in us and that's the only way I want to read the message. I don't want to consider that they're termites, that they're an accident of creation or slightly grown-up monkeys or whatever. I think we're fallen angels and we carry within us the divine spark. That's what I'm interested in. It will come out more in my work in the future, it's been there all along. People have seen the sailors in white in **Fireworks** as a band of angels. Certainly, certainly Cocteau did. I don't reject that interpretation.

VF: You haven't become cynical about this after your unfortunate experiences with type-casting and people in your films?

ANGER: Well, I'm still here. The experiences haven't been that unfortunate. I've had death threats, but no death attempts. Knock on wood. Oh dear, that's plastic. (Knocks.) This is wood. No, it's all part of the learning experience. I find human beings exceedingly interesting, however I don't go whole hog the way Jean Genet does, favoring the criminal as more interesting than the non-criminal. Because I've certainly known both. But the degree of shading between one class and another is infinite.

I've known some people who have never violated a law that anyone could catch them with, that I consider their minds open cesspools. Instead of "Open sesame," it's "Open cesspool."

Andy's one of those people. I'd call Andy a criminal. A societal criminal, because I think he's a bad influence and it just isn't Lance Loud that he's had a bad influence on. But hundreds, maybe thousands of kids have gotten into a role of cynical despair, fashionable putting-downess of everything. A negative attitude toward everything, this is being "with it". I'm not particularly fond of Mr. Nixon either, but Andy Warhol is long as he sticks around...I will go to his funeral. I'll bring a bunch of turnips.

pig in a compost pile

by j poet

the first few weeks that i rote for the barb i rote cuntry music revus. for a few months i fot the good fite and snowplowed my way thru a blizzard of questionmarks. why you rite abt that honkey music? how cum you waste yer time on merl haggard? why dont you rite abt rock'n'roll? at last i succombed to the pressure of the fans an began to rite abt rock'n'roll and other less ethnic musics.

in the new oakland co-op today what do i see but ol merle hisself starein me in the face from the cover of time magazine. and city mag also has an article abt country music old and new. frm a.p. carter to kinky friedman. well once more the rest of the world had caught up with me, poetic revenge is meated out, herein, my first all cuntry column in many moons. pass the horse manure an pull up a chair pardner.

if yr a fanatic reader of record labels the name buzz rabin may ring a bell. he rote the title tune for ringo starrs second l.p. (beaucoups of blues) now the boy has his own l.p. out on the elektra label. Cross Country Cowboy is the title and its the first country l.p. ive herd in six months that has the least lick of originality.

(if i may make a momentary digression, a few weeks ago in rolling stone sum moron of a record revuer sitting in his ivory tower had the nerve to pan chi coltranes excellent columbia l.p. Let It Ride. he said it was trite and cliche ridden. that she was tryin to sing like a spade. and that her song Who Ever Told You was unnessacarily vindictive.

(now in the pop-rock-country music world where mediocrity and commerciality fornicate on a bed of gold that is a ridiculous statement. anyone with half a brane knows that popular music of any kind is 90% cliche and 10% inspiration. we love rock n pop n country cause its mediocre. cause its safe. a respite frm the sla and pollution and wars and political nitemares we must live thru, not to mention the monotonous lives most of us lead. and all grate truths have something of the cliche abt them anyway. for anyone with an inkling of awareness to pretend pop music is revolutionary or even socially meaningful (except in the sense that it reflects the socio-ethno-politico-religious mores of the people who perform and listen to it) is idiotic. besides after listening to all them lil boy spoiled brat macho male rock stars wet their pants over sum "chicks" dirty tricks its refreshing, to say the least, to hear a woman get rite up in the face of sum m.c.p. with a fine sarcastic lyric and a driving beat.)

the point im trying to make in a long round abt way is that buzz rabin wallows in the world of country music cliches as happy as a pig in a compost pile. and comes up smelling like fresh new spring flowers. point being that theres nuthin rong with a cliche. in fact a cliche turned abt on itself to flash a new image in that tired poetic inner eye is even more mind blowin (speakin for myself, as usual) than a brand new image, cause the old cliche sets up a false sense of security that is shattered by the inspiration of the song riter. turnabt is more than fair play. its close to genius.

buzz rabin is able to attack each country music cliche and workin within the traditional framework make his song sparkle and shine. there aint one bad song on the l.p. and even a few extra lil country breakdowns thrown in for gud measure (16 cuts). he rites new lyrics for the streets of laradeo, a tune ive hummed for years despite the smothers brothers, and calls it "angels in red." and his "man an wife time" is so country lush romantic that i wanna run out an get a marrage lisence. "i believe in an ol fashioned jesus" had me eatin puffed wafers (breakfast of saviors) as an in between meal snack for a week. "lil darlins I through 6" has me dancin to the drug store for a six pac of trojans. yes sir boys and girls this heres a country l.p. with a lil taste for every cowfreak. 3 semis.

charlie rich got as much gold on his records as he got silver in his hair and thas a lot. for the past few weeks hes had 4 l.p.s. in the top 5 of the billboard country best sellers. its almost pointless to revu em but after playin the dives for so long he deserves every bit of recognition he gets. (talk abt cliches!phew!) so i have two of the 4 on my desk before me. Very Special Love Songs on Epic, and Fully Realized (a twofer) on mercury. i find the mercury set much more pleasing for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that u get 2 l.p.s. for the price of one.

v.s.l.s. was produced by billy sherrill. and all of his artists are beginning to sound the same to me. too much lush strings. too many backround voices. a few years ago he really had a nice crisp sparse hard country sound (i.e. tammy wynettes early discs) that drove me rite up the wall. now he seems to be movin twords the rite musically to that vast marsh of used catgut and sweetness known as m.o.r. pity. even tho charlie throws in a bit of nice piano hear and there and his vocals are as strong as evr the set drowns in a sloppy sea of overproduction.

the murcury set on the other hand crackles with life. produced by jerry kennedy in the early sixties it blends the best of folk-rock blues and country into an excellent package. from novelty songs, to blues, to rock n roll charlie covers all the bases. there are 24 tunes in the set and i could take the rest of the day ritein lil revus of each one, but id rather put it on the turn table and lissen. you do like wise an ya wount be disappointed. 3 semis. ferget abt the epic set.

melba montgomerys newest l.p. on elektra cud pass with a shove if it wasnt that it contains a song destined to becum a country classic as big as D-I-V-O-R-C-E. the song is called no charge and is one of the most offensive songs ive ever herd. mean i i hav all i can do to not pick up the record and smash it to pieces when i listen to it. which isnt much i tell you.

the song is called "no charge." this mother is standin by the sink doin dishes and her son cums in. mother is sung by melba in this mini-opra frm the pen of gud ol harlan howard. he presents a list of the chores he done for the week and how much he wants to get paid for em. she drys her hands, turns the bill over, and begins to sing

-for th nine months i carried you growin inside of me, No Charge for the nites i stayed up with you worried and prayed for you, No charge, etc etc"

of corse the kid is in tears by the end of the sermon and apoligizes for having the gaul for asserting his individual integrity. the song is almost enuff to bring on a primal. i find myself singin -for th 9 years u bullied and browbeat and bothered me, no charge, for the sexual neurosis growing inside of me, no charge, etc. etc. good goddess. and they talk abt country music growing up. they still force dinosaur christian morality down our guilty eardrums. puke city. melba shud be burned at the stake for this piece of trash, and harlan shud have his fingers broken off and shoved up his ass. they shud be run over by 3 semis fulla lead ingots.

3 quickies to close. poco, commander cody, and new riders of the purple sage are three city bred groops workin in a more or less country vein. an its a bad case of sclerousis that they carry with them. the cover of poco seven (epic) is a real eye catcher but the music is less than mediocre. to long solos, senseless tempo changes, untogether instrumental breaks, etc make the l.p.s. 8 songs seem like 800. codys live frm deep in the heart of texas (paramont) is a bit better but codys act just dont come across on record, even in a "live" setting. its really to bad. cody in personne is a frenzied evening of wild guitar and dumb dirty jokes. fantastic instrumental breaks an 50 jerk off boys room humor. none of this comes across on record. to bad. the new riders do a bit better but they are so sweet and harmonious its hard to take them seriously as a "country" band. they are merely city boys who like country music havin a bit of fun with playin cowboys. maybe they shud drink more beer an snort less coke. the riders are on columbia and im on the skids till next time. yall cumon back now, hear?

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